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101 174 sociated with the western expansion of the fur trade by both the English and the French, being dependent upon white goods and acting as middlemen and interpreters. Consequently Cree words were used often by the traders. Mandelbaum explains, in regard to the generic term, that, since the Blackfoot in particular were the enemy tribe, this term came to be especially applied to them.[6] Nevertheless to interpret it as always and exclusively referring to the Blackfoot is misleading.

? 175 Isham, writing in 1743, after having been for a decade on the west coast of Hudson's Bay, used the generic term in a widely inclusive sense. He was anxious to get the "Earchthinue" to come to the English forts on the Bay to trade. He had never seen any of them except "a Slave, which was brought down by the Southwd. Indians,—their country lies on the back of this Land and to the Westward of the Churchill River where the Spaniards frequent those seas, at the same time does not traffick with that nation,—I have heard from the mouth of the said Slave concerning that country, by which I understood it was situated much as York Fort Hays's River with a fine Navigable River that op'ns into the sea, and with great plenty of the best and finest fur's, which is their Chiefest Commodity's. The Sinnepoets and other Indians Going to war with them, is a hinderance to their Coming to to the English Settlements to trade. . . ."[8] It was presumably from this Indian that Isham recorded two different ways to count ten. One such list he designated as being the "Earchithinu Language," and the other as "Earchethinue Language in another part of the Country."[9] The first can be identified as Blackfoot, in the general sense of the term,[8] but the second is apparently neither Blackfoot nor Gros Ventre.

Le Gardeur de Saint Pierre, successor of La Verendrye and the last of those who tried to find "the way to the sea" for the French, rendered the generic Cree term as "Iactchejlini" but in addition mentions the Gros Ventres by name. He spent the winter of 1751

[6] Mandelbaum, p. 166.
[8] Isham, p. 113.
[9] Idem, p. 35 and p. 36.
[8] Identification by my colleague, Prof. James A. Geary, personal communication, September 17, 1949.

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at fort de la Rayne on the Assiniboine River, and remarks that the wars which the natives of this area have with the Iactchejlini, the Brochets, and the Gros Ventres, would be an insurmountable obstacle to his plans.[9] It is possible, of course, that the Gros Ventres here referred to are the Hidatsa of the Missouri, since some confusion between the two occurs in the later sources, but this is unlikely.[10] 175

A few years later, the English-speaking Hendry (or Henday) gave the general Cree term as "archithinues," and Wissler was convinced that the people so designated by Hendry, and met by him in 1754–55, constituted the main body of the Gros Ventres, who were then occupying the area between the branches of the Saskatchewan River.[11] Lewis, however, in his recent reconstruction of Blackfoot history, has preferred to follow Burpee in identifying these people as Blackfoot.[12] Whichever interpretation may be the correct one, in 1772 we have our first absolutely unquestionable description of the Gros Ventres by Cocking. He uses the term "archithinue" but gives evidence that it includes not only the Blackfoot groups and Sarsi, but the Gros Ventres as well.

Cocking was sent by the Hudson's Bay Company, as Hendry had been, to try to persuade the "equestrian natives" to come to the Bay to trade. Like Hendry, Cocking too was accompanied by some Cree and Assiniboine in his search out into the northern plains. Though he had started in summer, 1772, by November 4th he had not actually met any of those whom he sought, and in his journal on that date records: "I shall be sorry not to see the Equestrian natives who are a brave people and superior to any who visit our Forts. They have dealings with no Europeans. They live in a southwest westerly direction and draw toward the northeast in March to meet our natives who traffic with them."[13] On November 21st, however, things looked better, as "two Archithinue natives" arrived from the south. Upon being assured that

[9] Le Gardeur de Saint-Pierre in Margry, v. 6, p. 640.

[10] Scott, p. 547, in his review of the early history of the Arapaho, states that this was the first mention of the Gros Ventres by name.

[11] Hendry, pp. 328–51; Wissler, 1936, p. 5, and personal communication, July 24, 1947.

[12] O. Lewis, p. 16.

[13] Cocking, p. 110.

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175 Cocking's party was friendly, these two indicated that they would persuade the rest of their group to come and meet with them. Bad weather delayed the arrival of the larger group, and meanwhile Cocking's companions tried, without avail, to fix and use a buffalo pound which the "archithinue" natives had built the previous spring. Finally, on December 1st,

> "Our Archithinue friends came to us and pitched a small distance from us; on one side of the pound 21 tents of them, the other seven are pitched another way. One of the Leaders talks the Asinepoet language well, so that we shall understand each other, as my Leader understands it also. This tribe is named Powestic-Athinuewuck (i.e.) Water-fall Indians. There are 4 Tribes, or Nations, more, which are all Equestrians Indians, Viz. Mithco-Athinuwuck or Bloody Indians, Koskitow-Wathesitock or Blackfooted Indians,—Pegonow or Muddy-water Indians & Sassewuck or Woody Country Indians."[14]

175 101 Thus Cocking gives a very good approximation of the Cree terms, applied even today to the Blood, Blackfoot, Piegan and Sarsi, as well as the designation used by the Cree for the Indians whom we call Gros Ventres.[15] Wissler, and, more recently Ewers, refer to this passage in Cocking and suggest that the Waterfall Indians are the Gros Ventres.[16] Any remaining doubts regarding the identification are dispelled by the following quotation from Umfreville who was with the Northwest Company in the area for four years from 1784–88 and who knew the various groups. He states regarding the "Fall Indians":

> "This nation is named by us and by the Nehethawa [Cree] Indians, from their inhabiting a country on the Southern branch of the river [Saskatchewan], where the rapids are frequent. As they are not very numerous, and have a harsh gutteral language peculiar to themselves, I am inclined to think they are a tribe that has detached itself from some distant nation, with which we are not as

[14] Cocking, pp. 110–11.

[15] Cf. Mandelbaum, p. 166. For an early and quite independent list and explanation of the same Cree terms, see Richardson's Journal of 1819–20, quoted verbatim by Franklin, pp. 99–100.

[16] Wissler, 1936, p. 6; Ewers, 1945, p. 289–99.

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> yet acquainted. In this people another instance occurs of the impropriety with which the Canadian-French name the Indians. They call them *gros ventres* or big bellies; and that without any reason, as they are as comely and as well made as any tribe whatever; and are very far from being remarkable for their corpulency." [17]

It so happens that the French name, "Gros Ventres," has been retained and at present is the most widely used designation for the tribe, although the Blackfoot term for them, "Atsina," is occasionally employed in recent ethnological sources. In the past, however, in addition to the French, translations of that term such as "Big Bellies," "Paunch Indians," and so on, occurred, as well as those derived from the Cree appellation,—"Falls," "Water-falls," or "Rapids Indians." To distinguish them from the village-dwelling Hidatsa, also known as Gros Ventres, sometimes they were called "Gros Ventres of the Prairies," or "Gros Ventres of Montana," in recognition of their later habitat.

Something of intertribal relations on the northern plains can be gleaned from the record Cocking has left us. It seems significant that he does not rate among the "equestrian natives" the Assiniboine whom he knew. Then, as later, the Assiniboine were apparently relatively poor in horses compared to the Gros Ventres and Blackfoot. Cocking mentions in regard to the Gros Ventres, whom he had opportunity to observe from December 1st to the 16th, 1772, that, not only at hunting buffalo but in all their actions, they excel his companions. He notes that the Gros Ventres are mounted on light sprightly animals and that they likewise use packhorses, which give their women great advantage over the Cree and Assiniboine women "who are either carrying, or hauling on sledges, every day in the year." They impress Cocking as being more like Europeans and he remarks that they are more cleanly in clothing and food than his companions.[18]

The Assiniboine were, however, on account of their close association with the Cree, better armed; and the Gros Ventres were wary enough to ascertain the friendly intentions of Cocking's party

[17] Umfreville, p. 197.

[18] Cocking, p. 111. At this time too, Cocking says, the Gros Ventres used pottery of their own manufacture and tobacco which they themselves planted.

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175 before approaching. It is true that peaceful relations of some Assiniboine, with "Archithinue natives (their friends) two days journey beyond Manitow-Sakahegan," are mentioned.[19] From the location of Manitou Lake it is probable that these were Blackfoot, although Cocking does not specify the tribe in this instance. Then, as later, peace on the northern plains was of short duration. Graham, for instance, in 1775 writes regarding the Assiniboine: [648] "War is their delight and the Archithenues the objects of their inveterate enemity, from these poor creatures they take the fine Horses so frequent among them and which serve to convey their baggage about the country."[20]

175 648 It is significant, too, for intertribal relations that the Indians whom the Cree-Assiniboine dreaded to meet, as they accompanied Cocking out into the plains, were the Snake. On August 24th, 1772, the hunters of his party on the South Saskatchewan River, reported having seen several horses up the branch on the other side, and Cocking remarks: "They are all in general afraid, supposing the horses to belong to the Snake Indians with whom they are always at variance." Again, on September 16th, they saw a strange horse and "supposed it to belong to the Snake, their enemies." Finally, on the last day on which the Water-falls Indians were with Cocking's party, "three Archithinue natives of the same tribe" came from the westward to say that buffalo were scarce and that their countrymen were going to war with the Snake Indians.[21] This bears out the very definite tradition current among the Gros Ventres today that they had to drive the Snake from the territory which they occupied.

Lewis, in his reconstruction of the early history of the Blackfoot, maintains that the Piegan had driven the Kutenai and Snake across the mountains by about 1750.[22] A careful reading of Thompson's account of Piegan history, as given to him in 1786–87 by the old Cree Saukamapee, indicates that while the Piegan had been gaining ground from the Snake since the 1730's, their advance may not have been as rapid as Lewis has suggested. The Piegan

[19] Cocking, p. 106.
[20] Graham's Observations of 1775, in Isham, p. 311.
[21] Cocking, pp. 103, 106, 112.
[22] O. Lewis, pp. 13, 15, and Map B.

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were said to have reached the Stag (Red Deer) River when both they and the Snake were decimated by a smallpox epidemic,[33] which would seem to have been that of 1780. For the next three years there were no wars, as the remnants of both tribes were occupied in merely sustaining life—parties of young Snake men were left unmolested by the Piegan. It was then decided that in future warfare, instead of looking only for the honor of taking scalps, that the Piegan should capture women and young men and adopt them in order to augment their depleted numbers. Apparently the Piegan gradually advanced to the Bow River as the Snake withdrew. Thompson, then among the Piegan at the Bow River, states: "The country where the Snake now [i.e. 1786] are is far away and little known to the Peeagan." Scouts were out five days but saw no Snake. "Affairs were in this state when we arrived."[34] A few days later a war chief with fifty warriors was sent out to examine the country. This party returned after about twenty days with five horses and fifteen mules which they had captured from the Snake, and old Saukamapee's son gave an account of the expedition. If this chronology is correct, Cocking's companions in 1772 had every reason to fear the Snake and to suspect their presence, as the power of the latter would not have been broken in the northern plains until 1780.

Cocking, as others before him, failed in his mission to persuade the "equestrian Indians" to come to Hudson's Bay.[35] During the last two decades of the 18th century, the Hudson's Bay Company, as well as the rival Northwest Company, established trading

[33] Thompson, p. 336. We know nothing of the wider effects of the smallpox epidemic which affected the Cree in 1736. Cf. Mandelbaum, p. 182.

[34] Thompson, p. 340. The author, pp. 328-47, in giving the account of old Saukamapee, often quotes the latter directly. But inasmuch as he usually omits important diacritical marks, and intersperses comments of his own, care must be exercised in reading these pages which recount events extending in time from about 1730 up to include a few weeks after Thompson's arrival among the Piegan in 1786. Furthermore, he wrote his whole Narrative about 1839, at the age of 70, following his notebooks it is true, but also making generalizations regarding the Piegan which do not necessarily refer to the year 1786-87 he spent among them, but may indicate a later date. See p. 348 where he describes boundaries of the Piegan, Blood and Blackfoot territory.

[35] Cocking p. 111. Cf. Graham's Observations in Isham, p. 312.

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175 posts accessible to the Blackfoot and to the Gros Ventres. So long as the Cree and the friendly Assiniboine were appreciably 648 better armed than the other tribes on the northern plains, the traders had little to fear. But now, with the acquisition of more guns by the buffalo hunters, and with the increasing appetite of the latter, not only for still more firearms but for other items, especially spiritous liquors, they became more and more troublesome and it was necessary to fortify the trading posts.

Since the demand was mainly for beaver, and the Cree were the real trappers, they were particularly favored by the traders. Umfreville (1784–88) complains that both the Gros Ventres and the Blackfoot tribes bring in by far too many wolf skins, and says specifically of the Gros Ventres that they seem not yet initiated into the manner of hunting and killing beaver, dressing skins and killing small peltry.[36] Mackenzie from his observations in 1789 gives the impression that the buffalo hunters were little interested in trading at the posts, and states that the part of the Gros Ventres, who were with the Assiniboine on the plains near the central portion of the Assiniboine River, prepared fresh and dried buffalo meat and tallow, along with a few buffalo robes and wolf skins, to exchange for "arms and ammunition, rum, tobacco, knives and various baubles," with those who go to traffic with them.[37]

175 Mackenzie gives also the relative position and size of the northern plains groups. Some Cree-Assiniboine are mentioned by him as being at Nepawi and South Branch House, and whose territory extends upward about to the Eagle Hills. Next to them are the Cree about eighty tents and on the other side of the river their number may be 200. Mandelbaum cites this evidence to show that at this time the Cree were along the north Saskatchewan, but had not yet consolidated their position there.[38] Mackenzie goes on to say that at the southern headwaters of the North Saskatchewan dwell the Sarsi, 35 tents, 120 men; opposite to those [161] eastward on the headwaters of the South Branch are the Piegan, 1200–1500 men; next to them on the same water, are the Blood,

[36] Umfreville, p. 198.
[37] Mackenzie, v. 1, pp. cxl, cli.
[38] Mandelbaum, pp. 181–82.

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50 tents or 250 men; next to them downward extend the Blackfeet, their number may be 800 men; next to them and who extend to the confluence of the South and North branch, are the Fall or Big Bellied Indians, who may amount to about 600 warriors.[29]

Dislocation and Warfare (1790–1830)

Within a decade of the time of Mackenzie's observations, however, the Gros Ventres were being ousted from between the forks of the Saskatchewan where they had been apparently well established since at least 1772, when Cocking met them.[30] Undoubtedly the Gros Ventres were greatly weakened by the smallpox epidemic of 1780, as Wissler has suggested.[31] In any case they were subsequently pushed south and east by the allied Assiniboine and Cree, who had the great advantage of being relatively well-armed with guns. Thus the Gros Ventres were launched on the most turbulent period of their career, with enmity toward the whites as an important factor.

We know from Harmon how bitterly the Gros Ventres resented the more favorable treatment accorded the Cree-Assiniboine by the traders. He was at Alexandria, a Northwest Company post on the Assiniboine River, and records on June 10, 1801, the following: "It is currently reported and believed that the Rapid Indians are forming a war party to come against the Indians of this quarter, whom they consider, and I think with sufficient reason, as their enemies. If they come this way they will fall on us as upon the natives themselves, for they say that we furnish the Cree and Assiniboine with what firearms they want, while they get few."[32] Although this particular attack on the post did not materialize, there was real reason to have feared it. In the summer of 1793 the Gros Ventres attacked old fort Brulé (South Branch House) and killed all but one of the twenty or so inhabitants; in 1794 they pillaged Manchester House. These two

[29] Mackenzie, v. 1, p. cx.

[30] O. Lewis p. 12, places them East of the South Branch prior to about 1750.

[31] Wissler, 1936, p. 18. Cf. interesting tradition of the ravages of the epidemic, pp. 34–36.

[32] Harmon, p. 51.

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175 648 acts of depredation were long remembered and formed the basis for the bad reputation the Gros Ventres sustained among the traders. Henry, speaking of them in 1808 as an audacious and turbulent race, says that they have repeatedly attempted to massacre the traders.[83]

During the early part of the nineteenth century the Gros Ventres continued losing ground to the Assiniboine and Cree. Harmon, again in 1801, mentions, for instance, that a party of Cree-Assiniboine had left Fort Alexandria in June against the Rapid Indians and were bringing a number of women and children for "slaves."[84] In 1803 he records that 40 lodges of Cree-Assiniboine went out on a war party with 40 lodges of "others," apparently against both the Blackfoot and Rapid Indians.[85] Incidentally, as the Gros Ventres were pushed out of the Saskatchewan basin, they no longer formed a buffer between the Cree-Assiniboine and Blackfoot, and these latter came into more direct and deadly conflict. Having rebuilt South Branch House in 1805, Harmon was there in April 1806 when the Cree-Assiniboine in that region went to war against the Rapid Indians, "their inveterate enemies, with whom they frequently patch up peace which is generally short endurance."[86] In August of that same year some Assiniboine reported to Harmon that about 80 tents of Cree-Assiniboine, with about as many of the Blackfoot, were on their way to war against the Gros Ventres. Nothing came of this expedition, however, inasmuch as the temporary allies began quarreling over a horse which each claimed and ended in an all-day fight between them.[87]

[131] And so it went. By 1808 the Gros Ventres had been replaced in the area between the forks of the Saskatchewan and now roamed the territory between the South Branch and the Missouri, although some of them at least went to the posts to trade. Henry remarks that at this time they were bringing to Fort Vermillion a good trade in dried provisions, beaver skins, and grizzly bear and buffalo

[83] Henry, v. 2, p. 530.
[84] Harmon, p. 55.
[85] *Idem*, p. 78.
[86] *Idem*, p. 119.
[87] *Idem*, p. 120.

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robes,—that the Gros Ventres were industrious and were as good skin-dressers as the Mandan and better than the Blackfoot. He further mentions that they were formerly numerous and dreaded but that since the smallpox, and the depredations by the tribes with whom they have been at variance, they had diminished. Although they formerly had bloody wars with the Blackfoot tribes, in 1808 they were at peace with them.

Henry's estimate, however, that at this time the Gros Ventres numbered but 80 tents or 240 men, seems very low.[58] He was probably basing his figures on those who came that far north to trade, because in 1805 Laroque, while with the Crow on an island in the Missouri River near the confluence of the Big Horn, met a delegation of the Gros Ventres who were camped on the Big Horn River behind the mountain. He states that they occupied 275–300 "huts" and that it was with friendly sentiments that they came to this region. They brought words of peace and said that they came to procure some horses from the Crow. Laroque referred to them as "Big bellies of the fort de prairie" and mentioned that they and the Crow communicated with each other by means of the sign language, not being able to understand each other in speech.[59] This makes it quite certain that these Indians were not the Hidatsa.

It would seem, then, from the above as well as from the figures obtained in the same year, 1805, by Lewis and Clark, viz. 260 tents or 660 men,[60] that the estimates of both Thompson and Henry, observing as they were from the Canadian area from which the Gros Ventres had been driven, refer to only part of the main group of Gros Ventres. Henry himself remarks in 1811 that the Gros Ventres are increasing very fast and that he had always noticed a greater percentage of young men among them than among the neighboring tribes. He admits further: "I have not been able to obtain their exact number but am fully confident they exceed 100 tents."[61] Richardson, moreover, in his journal of 1818–19, identifies the Gros Ventres and claims that they have about 450 to 500 tents.[62]

[58] Henry, v. 2, pp. 530–31.
[59] Laroque, p. 20.
[60] Cf. Wissler, 1936, p. 4.
[61] Henry, v. 2, p. 733.
[62] Richardson, quoted in Franklin, pp. 99–100.

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During the second decade of the nineteenth century the American fur companies were beginning to show an active interest in the upper Missouri region. As Lewis has pointed out, there were certain differences between the methods used by the companies in Canada and those in the United States.[43] The Americans sent out trappers to hunt the streams for beaver rather than depending on the Indians to bring the pelts to the posts, as did the Canadian companies. The Gros Ventres as well as the Blackfoot resented the invasion of white trappers. To give but a single instance, in the summer of 1810 the Gros Ventres fell on a party of American freemen from Illinois whom they murdered and plundered of their possessions, including beaver skins which were marked and numbered. The Bloods were at war at the same time on the Missouri and murdered a party of Americans. Henry states: "The Bloods in general bear fully as bad reputation as the Fall Indians. They are fully as vicious, bloodthirsty, and turbulent, but, I believe, not so brave." [44]

Still another element which added appreciably to the difficulties of the Gros Ventres, in these first decades of the 19th century, was their increasing conflict with the numerous and powerful Crow. As they continually lost territory to the Cree-Assiniboine, it was not long before they were encroaching on the Crow, who promptly retaliated. It was largely the threat of the Crow to ally themselves with the Americans, in an offensive against the Gros Ventres, that fed the determination of the latter to again raid the Canadian posts. They were desperate for guns and ammunition and felt themselves unable to obtain them through regular trade. The Piegan, in order to protect their own trading interests, promised aid to the Gros Ventres, in case of attack by the Crow, and succeeded in temporarily pacifying them.[45]

In any case, the Gros Ventres were probably responsible for the abandonment of Chesterfield House, which had been rebuilt, after the amalgamation in 1822 of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company, at the mouth of the Red Deer River which empties into the South Branch of the Saskatchewan. It was

[43] O. Lewis, pp. 23–31.
[44] Henry, v. 2, 735–36.
[45] Henry, v. 2, 718–21.

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seemingly after the pillaging of this fort about 1826 that part of the Gros Ventres fled to the headwaters of the Missouri, wintered there, and then proceeded south to join their Arapaho kinsmen. According to Hayden, the Gros Ventres spent about five years hunting with the Arapaho and joined them in trading with the Mexicans.[46] During this sojourn, the Gros Ventres suffered a devastating attack of smallpox which was said to have reduced their number by half.

From sources independent of Hayden we know that a large group of Gros Ventres was actually in the Cimarron area during the late 1820's. Gregg, with a party of independent traders, was traveling in the Cimarron Valley when on June 21, 1831, they met a very large group of Indians,—he estimates about a thousand including men, women and children,—who followed them for a day or two in order to pilfer what they could and to receive presents if possible. They were finally bought off with about sixty dollars worth of trade goods contributed by various members of the party. It was thought at first that these Indians were Comanche and Arapaho. "But," states Gregg, "they were principally if not altogether Blackfoot and Gros Ventres." A few days later Gregg received intelligence that Captain Sublette and his party, on their way from St. Louis to Santa Fe, had met "an immense horde of Blackfeet and Gros Ventres," and that although the Indians had assumed a menacing attitude, the party had passed without serious molestation. That same evening, however, Gregg camped near a place called the "Battle Ground," famous for a skirmish which a caravan of traders in the company of Mexican troops had in 1829 with the Gros Ventres. Gregg was told that on that occasion, the traders and troops, under Col. Vizcarra, were camped on the Cimarron when a party of 120 Gros Ventres approached on foot. The traders did not welcome the Indians, but seeing that they were disposed to remain until morning, Col. Vizcarra promised to disarm them. Nevertheless he failed to do so, and all of a sudden the Indians sprang to their feet, gave a yell and fired on the party. A Taos Indian, by giving his own life, saved that of the Colonel. The Mexican troops pursued the Gros

[46] Hayden, 341. The gist of what Hayden gives for this period is correct, though his dates are inaccurate.

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Ventres, killing and wounding a considerable number of them, but losing a captain and two or three privates.[47]

An interesting version of why the Gros Ventres parted with the Arapaho was related to Hayden by an Arapaho, named Friday, at Fort Laramie when the former was there in 1859–60. Friday stated that the Arapaho and Gros Ventres were camped together on the Cimarron where the Mexicans usually came to trade with them. On this particular occasion the chief of the Gros Ventres wanted all of the trade, whereas the chief of the Arapaho suggested that half of the traders should go to the Gros Ventres and the other half should trade with the Arapaho. An altercation between the two chiefs followed during which the chief of the Gros Ventres stabbed the chief of the Arapaho. The brothers and sons of the latter promptly retaliated by killing the Gros Ventre chief. Whereupon a battle ensued, but peace was made before many were killed. So the two tribes decided to separate, the Arapaho ranging along the S. Platte and Arkansas, the Gros Ventres passing through North Park to Bridger's Pass and thence along the west side of the Rockies to the region of the Three Tetons.[48]

Whether or not this was the actual cause for the separation,—and it sounds reasonable enough,—it is certain that the Gros Ventres did go north giving trouble to the whites along the headwaters of the Snake and Greene Rivers, and engaging some trappers who had met at a trading rendezvous at Pierre's Hole in the summer of 1832. Hayden has given an account of the battle and others refer to it, but Chittenden presents the most detailed description, having gathered together contemporary newspaper accounts, and so on. His version, with which Hayden's in general agrees, is that The Rocky Mountain traders under William L. Sublette, and those of the American Fur Company under Fontanelle, met at Pierre's Hole in the Teton Basin in July 1832. There were many hundreds of Indians in the valley, mostly Flathead and Nez Percé. When the business of the rendezvous was almost finished, a group under M. G. Sublette set out toward the main Snake River and camped for the night not far from the place of the rendezvous. The next morning a band of Gros

[47] Gregg, pp. 227–28, 231–32, 239.
[48] Hayden, p. 322.

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Ventres approached in two parties, about 150 men, carrying with them a Hudson's Bay Company flag which they had taken from a party of Hudson Bay Company trappers whom they had recently defeated. The Gros Ventres made signs of truce, but the whites did not trust them and, as a Gros Ventre chief approached the party alone, a Flathead, by prearranged signal, shot him. The Gros Ventres withdrew to a copse and entrenched themselves, the women doing the work while the men held the firing line. 175● 648

Sublette sent for reinforcements and his brother, William L. Sublette, came with Campbell and others. William Sublette and Campbell led a direct attack on the Gros Ventres entrenchments. The former was wounded and two of the others were killed. Finally Sublette decided, against the wishes of the friendly Indians, to burn the Gros Ventres out. One of the Flathead, who had communicated with the Gros Ventres, informed the whites that the Gros Ventres had 600–800 warriors who would arrive soon. The whites understood the Flathead to say that these warriors were attacking the main rendezvous camp at that moment, and so withdrew. The Gros Ventres fled. This was rated as one of the worst encounters of Indians and traders in the west. Five whites were killed and Sublette wounded; the Gros Ventres casualties are not exactly known, but they were said to have left nine dead warriors and 25 horses together with nearly all of their baggage in the "fort." Later on, when leaving the rendezvous, a party of whites was attacked, two being killed and one wounded. Sublette saw the large body of whom the Gros Ventres had spoken, but they did not attack, and the Gros Ventres finally left the country via the Wind River.[49]

This was not the end of difficulties for the Gros Ventres, however. Chittenden merely states that they then had a serious encounter with the Crow and were scattered over Crow territory. Hayden gives us more details which he apparently had from the Gros Ventres themselves as well as from traders.[50] It seems that the Crow were in the habit of visiting the Flathead to trade for horses and this summer of 1832 they were returning to their country in two groups. The Gros Ventres, without realizing that

[49] Chittenden, v. 2, pp. 657-62.
[50] Hayden, p. 342.

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Crow were in the vicinity, camped at a place through which the first contingent of Crow had already passed. Four young men from the second division of Crow were attempting to catch up with the first when they came across the Gros Ventres camp, thinking they had reached their goal. The Gros Ventres seized and killed three of these young men, but the fourth escaped to warn his people, who laid in ambush at a narrow pass through which the Gros Ventres would go. Taking the Gros Ventres by surprise, they completely demoralized them, killing 67 and capturing twice that many women and children. The remainder fled and reached safety with the Blackfoot, leaving the wounded where they lay.

Readjustment (1830–1870)

That the whole Gros Ventres tribe could have gone south to the Arapaho, remained a few years, and suffered such disasters in 1832, is highly improbable. First of all, it is unlikely that if the whole tribe disappeared from their usual habitat they would have been able to regain their territory from encroachments by Assiniboine from the east and northeast, by Crow from the south, and by Piegan and Blackfoot from the west and northwest. Furthermore it is equally unlikely that such absence would have been unnoted by Catlin who in 1832, at the American Fur Company Post at the mouth of the Yellowstone, gives a reasonable estimate of the Gros Ventre population (430 lodges) and notes the common error of traders in counting that tribe indiscriminately with the Blackfoot groups, in spite of the difference between the Blackfoot and Gros Ventre language.[51] Moreover, according to Maximilian, Mitchell of the American Fur Company affirmed in 1833 that he had always done business with the Gros Ventres with pleasure, and had never had any proof of the treachery imputed to them. Had there been no Gros Ventres around for five years, Mitchell would no doubt have mentioned that fact. The entire feeling of Maximilian's account is that the Gros Ventres were well known to American Fur Company traders—as compared to some Blackfoot proper, who arrived at the fort and were unknown.[52]

Finally, native tradition gives some negative evidence. Our

[51] Catlin, v. 1, pp. 59-60.
[52] Maximilian, pp. 73, 154.

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older informants at the present time belong to the bands known as the Frozens, the Tendons, and the Upper Quarters. If the entire tribe had gone on such a visit to the Arapaho, it is almost certain that some tradition of this travel would have been passed on, as it would have occurred in the lifetime of Coming Daylight's grandmother and of The Boy's father, from both of whom these informants had much reliable material. It thus seems more likely that several bands—perhaps in population amounting to as much as half the total tribe—went on the expedition together. It was customary for the Gros Ventres to split into smaller groups and for several bands to winter together. It would seem probable that one or two such smaller groups pillaged the Hudson's Bay Company post in the late 1820's, wintered together on the upper Missouri, and then traveled south to the Arapaho.

While part of the Gros Ventres tribe was with the Arapaho, the remainder,—roaming the strip of plains between the Blackfoot groups on the west, the Assiniboine on the east, and the Crow on the south,—managed to improve their situation somewhat. Although the whole tribe was probably reunited by 1833, when Maximilian gives us an account of his meeting with them, they were fairly prosperous in spite of the losses sustained by those who had fought at Pierre's Hole and had then been ambushed by the Crow. Maximilian states specifically that " these Indians were formerly very poor, had bad tents and could not buy firearms; they have, however, recovered of late and supplied their wants." [48] One of our informants told us that she had heard often, when she was a child, that in her grandmother's young days,—which we estimate as the early years of the 19th century—the Gros Ventres were very badly off and had so few horses that they used dog transport almost exclusively, but that the situation gradually improved, and, by the time our informant was born (ca. 1855), they again had many horses, a sign of prosperity. From Maximilian's description and from Bradley's estimate of the situation in the early 1830's, it would seem that there was no dearth of either horses or firearms among the Gros Ventres at that time. Maximilian states, however, that they showed the effect of their encounters with the Crow by a noticeable disproportion of the sexes, and that

[48] Maximilian, p. 75.

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175 they had been hard put to it recently to ransom thirty warriors
648 from the Crow—probably the wounded who had been abandoned in the panic following the ambush of 1832.[54]

So far as relations with the American traders go, in 1833 and subsequently the Gros Ventres were on their best behavior. Maximilian notes that the very large group of Gros Ventres, whom he met at the Judith River as he traveled with Mitchell of the American Fur Company on their way to Fort McKenzie, were surprisingly well-behaved. He adds, rightly enough, that it was to their self-interest to be so, in the light of the fact that formerly they had suffered with the traders on account of their bad reputation. He further remarks that the Gros Ventres were now known as dressing buffalo robes better than most of the other tribes. After trading a bit with the Gros Ventres where they met them, Mitchell invited them to meet him at Fort McKenzie. When the Gros Ventres arrived there, their chief men were received at the [439] Fort with the same pomp and ceremony as were accorded the [431] Piegan chiefs in the preliminaries to actual trading. The Gros Ventres, too, upheld their end by bringing the usual presents—a horse and some beaver skins—to present to the trader.[55]

This Fort had been established at the mouth of the Marias, very close to the later site of Ft. Benton, and was known first as Fort Piekann and the next year was renamed Fort McKenzie. It had been established at this point for dealing with the Blackfoot groups, especially the Piegan, and the surrounding tribes. At that time the American Fur Company was particularly interested in obtaining beaver skins, and one beaver skin was worth two buffalo robes. Later, as the market for buffalo robes opened up, the beaver gradually lessened in value so that finally two or three beaver skins became the equivalent of one buffalo robe.[56] Lewis has emphasized what the change in market meant for the Blackfoot groups.[57] Relations of the Gros Ventres with the whites improved, and there was a tendency for the Gros Ventres to become more and

[54] Cf. Ewers, 1943, p. 603: Maximilian, pp. 71, 75, 76.
[55] Maximilian, pp. 75–76, 126, 165.
[56] Bradley, p. 203, note on 204.
[57] O. Lewis, pp. 34–59.

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more dependent on trading as their thirst for liquor became greater and greater.

At the time of which we are speaking, 1833, the Gros Ventres and Piegan were at least temporarily at peace. The Assiniboine, however, were strong and, with the Cree, were raiding deep into Gros Ventres territory. They were likewise at enmity with the Piegan. Poorly mounted as they were, they were bold enough to attack Fort McKenzie in 1833, and were driven off by the whites, with very little assistance from the Piegan who were there at the time. The next fall apparently this same band of Cree-Assiniboine cut off sixty lodges of Gros Ventres in the Sweet Grass Hills and the Gros Ventres lost 400, only one escaping to tell the tale.[88]

The Crow, too, were being very troublesome and Bradley describes their siege of Fort McKenzie in 1834.[89] The traders on this occasion finally resorted to firing a cannon which frightened the Crow. To wipe out their disgrace in running away, the Crow rallied under their leader Rotten Belly, and resolved to make an expedition against the Blackfoot. They came across a dozen Gros Ventres warriors, however, near the Fort and satisfied their honor by killing them instead of the Blackfoot. Nevertheless the Gros Ventres had fought bravely and inflicted losses upon the Crow, including their chief who, when he was dying from the wounds, told his people never to attack the whites again. Bradley tells us that the Crow kept to this advice. Nevertheless they continued giving trouble to the Gros Ventres. Bradley says in 1835 that war continued to rage as fiercely as ever. For example, the Gros Ventres killed 40 Crow who had tried to steal their horses near the Fort; some months later they again got the best of a raiding expedition of Crow.[90]

In building up to the position they maintained in 1855, the Gros Ventres were undoubtedly able to profit from the effects of the great smallpox epidemic of 1837–38 which wreaked such havoc among all the Blackfoot groups and the Assiniboine, but which left the Gros Ventres and Crow relatively untouched. Bradley gives

[88] Bradley, 219.
[89] Bradley, p. 216.
[90] Bradley, p. 219. For an account of present Gros Ventre tradition of the first of these two battles, see pp. 94–96.

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an account of the terrible number of deaths among the Blackfoot in 1838 and states that the northern Assiniboine lost two-thirds of their number. He says of the Gros Ventres however that they escaped very lightly, their entire loss being less than 200. "This is to be attributed to their being in a measure innoculated by previous experience with the disease communicated by the Arapahoes in a visit to the south." [61] It may be recalled that Hayden mentions the epidemic which struck the Gros Ventres when they were among the Arapaho. Both are probably referring to the severe, but more or less localized, epidemic which hit the Indians of the Kansas Territory in 1829. Hayden, referring to the five year period during which the Gros Ventres hunted and traded along with the Arapahos—says that during this time: "Smallpox passed among them, having been communicated to them through other tribes with whom they were at peace or carried on a traffic. This disease, at that time, destroyed about half their number, but secured the remainder from the next attack which occurred in 1838. At this later period the smallpox only acted on the young, and destroyed a number of them, but the chiefs and elderly men escaped so that the tribe was not reduced to the disorderly and helpless condition of the Blackfoot and other surrounding nations." [62] That the Blackfoot groups were disorganized to a large extent is borne out by a completely independent source. Father Mengarini in 1841 notes the troublesome raids by the Blackfoot, around St. Mary's Mission among the Flatheads on the Bitter Root River, and adds: "Had not pestilence decimated the tribe the year before our arrival, our mission at St. Mary's would have been impossible." [63]

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In the 1840's, then, the Gros Ventres had only one full-strength enemy to contend with, namely, the Crow. Presumably, they took advantage of the opportunity to raid extensively both the Blackfoot groups and the Assiniboine. Nevertheless they evidently continued to keep up their good relations with the whites. Father Point, S.J., who spent the fall and winter of 1846–47 among the Blackfoot and Gros Ventres wrote to Father de Smet regarding

[61] Bradley, p. 226.
[62] Hayden, p. 341.
[63] Mengarini, p. 8.

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the latter tribe that they appeared to him "to have the advantage of the others in being more adroit, more docile, and more courageous; but they are more attached to their old superstitions and are terrible *demanders*, as the Canadian employees here call shameless beggars; happily they are not offended when refused." In addition, he stated that if the Gros Ventres were less importunate he would willingly entitle them the Flatheads of the Missouri "as they have something of their simplicity and bravery." He considered that "the Piegans are the most civilized but the most noted thieves; the Blood well made and generally less dirty; while the Blackfeet proper are, it is said, the most hospitable." Among all four tribes Father Point found the disproportion of sexes great, and attributed to warfare the preponderance of women over men.[64]

The heart of the area held by the Gros Ventres at that time, and claimed by them subsequently at least until the establishment of the Fort Belknap Reservation in 1873, and probably until 1888, was described by Hayden as follows: "At present [1862] and for many years past, they range along the Milk River, on the east side of the Missouri, extending as far as the Cypress Mountains. From this line to the Marias River stretches a beautiful level country well covered with grass and adapted to pasturage of buffalo. Here the Indians under consideration may be found at all seasons—in the winter along the banks of the Milk River where wood may be obtained and in summer on the plains where fuel is not so necessary."[65] As the Gros Ventres were by no means confined to this area they were in intermittent conflict with surrounding tribes.

With a view to settling the quarrels of the Blackfoot, Piegan and Gros Ventres east of the mountains, and of the Flathead, Kootenais and Nez Percé and others west of the mountains, Governor Stevens held a council with the Gros Ventres on the Milk River in August, 1853, and with the Blackfoot and Piegan at Fort Benton in September.[66] In 1854, he ordered a thousand dollars worth of goods from Culbertson of the American Fur Company, for distribution to the Piegan and Gros Ventres. These goods, consisting mainly of foodstuffs with which they were un-

[64] Father Point's letter of 1847, in De Smet, pp. 254, 256.
[65] Hayden, p. 340.
[66] Hoopes, p. 101.

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familiar, were given to the Gros Ventres at the Milk River. In spite of warnings, the Indians ate the food uncooked, with the result that many became sick and several died. A creole Frenchman, living among them at the time, persuaded the Gros Ventres that they had been poisoned deliberately, and some of the warriors wanted to go after Culbertson with the intention of killing him. Fortunately, however, Culbertson was so well known to and liked by most of the Gros Ventres that the rasher members of the tribe were restrained from carrying out this project.[87]

Stevens concluded in 1855 a treaty at the Judith River whereby the Blackfoot Nation (including the Gros Ventres) agreed that their territory should be a common hunting territory for all signatories. The United States agreed to spend $20,000 each year for 10 years in provisions for the Gros Ventres, Blackfoot, Piegan and Blood, and $15,000 a year for ten years in instructing them in agriculture and mechanical pursuits, educating their children, and so on. The non-signatory tribes were the Crow, Assiniboine and Sioux.[88]

Although it was reported that the good will among the tribes was remarkable, and that peace was sincerely desired, raiding parties continued very much as before. In addition, more and more whites were encroaching on the territory supposed to have been reserved for the use of the Blackfoot tribes and Gros Ventres. Gold was discovered within the area about 1862, and Lewis has given a cogent summary of events which led up to Piegan enmity toward both Gros Ventres and whites, and which culminated in war, 1866–70.[89]

The End of the Buffalo Days (1870–1890).

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The end of the buffalo days was now rapidly approaching. The completion of the Union Pacific railroad in 1869 split the northern and southern herds of buffalo. With the presence of increasing numbers of commercial white hunters, armed with long-range repeating rifles, the end of the great north herd was beginning in 1876. It was not, however, until 1880 that slaughter was universal

[87] Bradley, p. 271.
[88] Hoopes, pp. 113–15.
[89] O. Lewis, pp. 62–66.

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over the area. The Gros Ventres had the benefit of buffalo hunting a trifle longer than the other groups. All the buffalo in Montana were in February, 1882, in their territory, between the Milk River and the Bear Paw Mountains. The hunting season, of October 1882 to February 1883, finished the annihilation of the great northern herd and left only stragglers, merely a few thousands.[70] By August, 1883, both the Blackfoot and the Crow Agencies reported that all game was gone from their respective reservations, and a letter from the Fort Belknap Agency stated that game there "was practically exhausted."[71] In 1884 the Blackfoot and Crow agencies reported that the buffalo was extinct.[72] After ceding more land, in 1888 the limits of the Fort Belknap Reservation, which the Gros Ventres share with the Assiniboine, were finally fixed.[73]

Missionary endeavors, carried on by the Jesuit Fathers, had begun in earnest only in 1885. Prior to that time contact with missionaries had been sporadic. Father Point in 1846–47 had been well received and sent in a good report of this tribe. When Father Giorda attempted to go among them in 1862, however, Bull Lodge took him prisoner and stripped him of his possessions. Since his captivity did not last longer than a few weeks, and his property was restored to him, several months later he made another attempt. This time, while there was some opposition at first, he was permitted to baptize over a hundred children. Subsequently Fathers Rappagliosi and Grassi made several visits respectively, and at considerable intervals. Finally, after some preliminary negotiations, Father Ebershweiler established permanent residence in 1885, and the school at St. Paul's was opened in 1887. The mission and school flourished. In 1891 the founder was replaced by Father Flusi, assisted by Father Sansome.[74]

The Gros Ventres population—always small, relative to that of surrounding tribes—was steadily declining. Hayden's estimate of 1853 placed the total at 2520.[75] In 1883, at the time of the

[70] Hornaday, pp. 492, 506, 510–11.
[71] Report of Commissioner of Indian Affairs 1883–1915, pp. lx, 98.
[72] *Ibid.*, pp. 107, 109.
[73] *Ibid.*, p. 295.
[74] Palladino, pp. 187, 195–96, 230, 232, 235.
[75] Hayden, p. 344. Gros Ventres today claim their number was then 10,000.

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disappearance of the buffalo, the population was officially recorded as being 970. By 1895 it had been reduced to 596.[10] At this low ebb, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, there was still a strong feeling among the Gros Ventres against the white man's dress; as of old, a man's wealth and standing still was measured by the number of horses he owned. Nevertheless the ceremonial aspects of their culture, already on the wane before that decade, had practically disappeared.

[10] Report of Commissioner of Indian Affairs 1883-1915, pp. 101, 188.